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A NOVEL IDEA: THE FRESHMAN BOOK AND THE WRITING CENTER

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Wofford College, like many other schools, assigns a book to its incoming freshmen each summer for them to read before they arrive on campus in the fall. Our goal is for them to share a common intellectual experience and to see right away that the emphasis of a liberal arts education is learning through reading, thinking, and discussing. And we'd like to focus at least one of their first discussions on a thought-provoking book, rather than on a topic such as slob roommates or whether or not to join a Greek-letter organization.

This practice is fairly common, but getting students to read the book, engage in lively discussion, and make the reading meaningful is not common. Some students are not going to read a book over the summer regardless of how entertaining it is or how it relates to their upcoming college experience. Other students need to be convinced that reading it is worth their time and will apply to the curriculum and their education. In either case, some encouragements/threats are necessary to help us convince students to take this assignment seriously.

So, at Wofford we incorporate the book into the freshman Humanities 101 class. The class is writing intensive, but unlike English 101, it's taught by professors from all of the humanities, and the topics vary widely from section to section, from year to year, ranging from Family Fictions to Cosmology to French Detective Novels. A committee of humanities professors solicits recommendations and picks a novel for the program each year based on several criteria. For example, this fall, many of the Humanities 101 courses at Wofford will fall under the thematic umbrella of "war." We've chosen *Paco's Story* by Larry Heineman, a National Book Award-winning novel dealing with the Vietnam War. Staying true to the title of the program—The Novel Experience, which was the idea of the College President—we always choose a novel by a contemporary author. That author has to be willing to come to Wofford and speak to the student body in response to essays written by the freshmen, and he or she has to be willing to come for \$5,000.

During the summer, a packet of information concerning The Novel Experience goes out to the incoming freshmen. It informs them what the novel is and what they're expected to do—read it before arriving and write an essay in response to a question posed by their professors during the first week of class. They are also informed that their essays will be considered for publication in a booklet, and that the top eight essayists will get to eat lunch with the author.

Some students are ecstatic upon receiving this information because the novel or author selected is one of their favorites. That was particularly true of *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, and although Card turned out to be different from the person they had imagined him to be, the experience still made a huge impact on many students.

With the regular start of classes, the humanities professors convene with their freshmen and announce that 1) yes, they WERE supposed to read the book, and they need to write a short essay on it by the end of the week, and 2) the entire class will be going to dinner together on the town the next night. The essay will be a response to a prompt or quote of the faculty's choosing that touches on a critical point of the novel. For example, last year, for Ha Jin's *Waiting*, they chose the quote, "All those years you waited torpidly, like a sleepwalker, pulled and pushed about by others' opinions, by pressure, by your illusions, by the official rules you internalized." The students picked a character in the book who did or did not do what the quote suggests.

The dinner, well, the dinner is fun. By lottery, each class chooses a local restaurant where they'll eat and discuss the novel. That's right—we take everyone out for meals ranging from pizza to prime rib. The first year, the school paid. Afterward, we got such good publicity that a donor stepped up and volunteered to foot the bill in the future. The goal at dinner is to eat (a lot—one student said, after his tenth piece of pizza, "I'm full, but the food is still free"), to get to know the town, to get to know each other, and to engage in a lively, insightful discussion of the book. Of course, there's a little grumbling if students didn't enjoy the book, but professors enjoy pointing out that the students ought to get used to it. One professor said, "The books we assign in your college classes aren't always picked according to how much we think you'll like them."

How much class time professors devote to the book depends on the topic of their particular humanities class. All of the students, however, turn in their essays at the end of the week. Professors read them all over the weekend, pick out the best two or three per class, and, on Monday, submit these to the committee. Students may or may not receive a grade on this first paper—it's up to each individual Humanities professor. The committee takes the batch of the best essays, usually about sixty, reads all of them and picks the best eight. "Best" is, of course, subjective, but in this case means most lucid, most interesting, most thought-provoking, whatever. The committee does some final editing and sends one set of the eight best to the Communications Office and one set to the author. The Communications Office puts together a brochure, and the author has a week to prepare a lecture, or tailor a lecture, to respond to the eight essays. He or she comes to campus and addresses the entire freshman class and all the humanities professors. The student authors of the eight best papers have lunch with the novel's author, and, that evening the author reads from his or her work, usually from something new.

That's The Novel Experience. It works pretty well—it lets students connect with each other by having common experiences and introduces students to the close relationships they'll form with some of their professors, and it shows them that we value intellectual curiosity, reflection, and expression. The downside, of course, is that it's expensive to do it the Wofford Way. The meals at local restaurants probably cost the school something like \$7000 (for a freshman class of about 330). Add printing costs and the cost of bringing the author and the total bill runs about \$14,000. But you can think of ways of cutting costs. For example, instead of glossy brochures, you can Xerox the eight essays. Also, the meal is fun and flashy, but it's not as important as assigning the students essays and giving them the incentive of publication and lunch with the author. It might be possible to have a special freshman meal at your school's dining hall, although going out on the town is part of the fun. You can probably get local or regional authors to come for less than \$5000. The Wofford Writers Series has had many fine novelists come to campus for a day for \$1000 or less.

So how does the Writing Center fit in with The Novel Experience? Next year, we plan to integrate the Writing Center even more into The Novel Experience by involving the staff in all stages. To begin with, the Writing Center Staff will receive a copy of the novel during the summer so that they will be familiar with the book when freshmen come to the Writing Center.

The Writing Center staff will also play a role in deciding on the essay topic. Humanities professors generally meet

a few days before the school year resumes to discuss the chosen novel and to decide on an essay topic; this year, the Writing Center staff will be invited to that meeting to participate in the discussion and to help choose the prompt. That active involvement will help us gain valuable insight which we can use as we work with students on their papers in the following week. In this way, The Novel Experience becomes a training session for the staff. At this meeting, we will also distribute flyers with information about the Writing Center and ask faculty members to pass them out to students along with the first assignment. These flyers will inform students of hours of operation, goals of the Writing Center, and names of staff members.

The Writing Center staff will participate in the Humanities 101 dinner discussions as well. This will not only give freshmen another contact on campus but will also help publicize the Writing Center and ensure that freshmen know that the Writing Center is open and eager to help. Furthermore, many students will get to know a member of our staff and will feel less intimidated about using the Writing Center. Finally, the Writing Center staff will be available to help students with papers beginning the first week of school.

We believe that The Novel Experience is an ideal opportunity to encourage students to write drafts early and get help when they need it. Freshmen are usually anxious about the very first paper they write in college because they don't know what's expected. A five-paragraph essay? Quotes and citations? Formal style and intellectual diction? The Writing Center staff will have read the book, participated in two discussions of it, and will have previous experience with many of the professors at Wofford, so they should be able to help steer incoming freshmen in the right direction by giving them pointers on how to meet the standards of college writing.

There are many benefits in involving the Writing Center in the freshman Novel Experience, benefits for both the freshmen and the Writing Center staff. First and foremost, we will be letting incoming freshmen know about resources that are available to them on campus. We will help calm their fears about what will be expected at the college level versus the high school level. We believe that if we introduce them to the Writing Center as freshmen, and they see that it is not threatening or demeaning, they will be much more likely to continue to use it throughout their time at Wofford. Combining the Writing Center and The Novel Experience will make both more meaningful and more successful.

Austin Baker is a rising junior and English major who spent the summer working as a photojournalism intern in Juneau, Alaska.

After graduating from Wofford College, **Elizabeth Norman** did field research in Vietnam over the summer and will attend medical school in the fall.

Ivy Farr left South Carolina in September to travel around the world for nine months as Wofford's Presidential Scholar.

Deno Trakas (TrakasDP@Wofford.edu), professor of English and director of the Writing Center at Wofford, isn't nearly as interesting as his students.

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